AT WHAT ALTAR WILL YOU KNEEL
Matthew 9:9-13
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

The first weekend in June is one of the major turning points in American life. It is listed on no schedule or calendar but something very significant transpires in the mind and heart of this culture on this weekend. It is a time of endings and beginnings: time to bring to a conclusion, or at least a resting place, the September through May activities and concerns. It is time to slow down and reflect a bit, to savor sunny days and long, pleasant evenings. For many families, mine among them, it is a time for celebration, when one person emerges from the educational process successfully, with diploma in hand. In thousands of commencement addresses this weekend and next, millions of wise and witty words will be aimed at graduating seniors. In many of them a question will be raised, one posed long ago by the English poet, John Keats:

> "To what green altar, O mysterious priest
> Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies...?"

The late Howard Lowry, President of the College of Wooster, singled out that question as the matter which had intrigued and occupied his attention and energies and imagination for thirty years. To what green altar? Or, as I have paraphrased, "At what Altar Will You Kneel?" (See College Talks, p.112). The question is posed today for those who may be graduating. But in the broader sense I pose it for all of us; for it is the religious question.

As I thought about the question I recalled a motion picture which was released ten years ago near the end of the stormy 1960's. The Graduate, attempted to address the whole matter of the frustration the American middle class was feeling about itself by examining its values. In theological terms the movie was a biting commentary on contemporary idolatry. It begins, you may recall, as Benjamin returns home after a very successful college experience. His parents have thrown a graduation party for him. With his whole life in front of him, wanting now to make responsible vocational and philosophic decisions, Benajmin realizes at the party that he is surrounded by people who are no longer asking the questions. Each, in a way, particularly his parents, have sold out, and given both body and soul to the pursuit of money, success and prestige. A particularly insightful moment occurs when one of his father's friends, a successful executive, ushers the graduate away from the crowd for a minute, puts an arm around his shoulder and out of earshot from the noisy cocktail party says intimately, "One word, Benji; maybe the most important word you will ever hear." Benjamin's eyes light up, finally someone is going to discuss the issues about which he is most concerned. The executive continues gravely, "Plastics, Benji: get into plastics."

From there he is drawn into an affair with the infamous Mrs. Robinson and proceeds to spend his summer at what the movie defines as the altar of Middle Class America: the pursuit of pleasure, mostly through booze. Even though he knows he is being seduced by both Mrs. Robinson and the value system she represents, he is bored and uneasy. He is rescued from his emptiness by a young woman, whom he loves profoundly. She happens, also, to be Mrs. Robinson's daughter. When he reveals his intent to marry the girl, her parents push her into marriage with another suitor. The movie concludes in a bazarre and brilliant sequence as Benji rescues Elaine from the wedding, in a Presbyterian Church, beating back the enraged congregation with an ornamental brass cross. He uses the cross to barricade the doors of the church with all the people inside, and the happy couple rides off into the future on a bus. The

message? Freedom, wholeness, joy become possible when you leave middle class values behind, including its very proper religion.

Appealing as that sounds, it is never that simple. And yet the movie raised some important issues. I thought it was one of Hollywood's better efforts, because it identified in honest and understandable terms, the altars to which we are inclined to kneel. As such I have always regarded it as a modern commentary on the central Biblical motif of idolatry which shows up as an underlying motif in both of our texts this morning.

The New Testament Lesson begins with the call of Matthew, the tax collector, to discipleship and proceeds to a dinner at which Jesus is discovered to be eating with other tax collectors and assorted sinners. Those two actions were viewed with horror by proper religious people. Jesus not only committed a social faux pas by associating with outcasts, he was also violating a handful of ceremonial laws. When He was quizzed by the Pharisees about His behavior He said simply, "Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

The essence of the religion of the Pharisees was the whole legal and sacrificial system. It guaranteed that the individual was right with God if he obeyed the rules and performed appropriately at the altar.

Jesus was saying that God doesn't really care about that so much as He cares about the way people treat one another. Legal propriety and ceremonial exactness are not as important, that is to say, as kindness, love, generosity - around a dinner table. In fact, in a complete turn about, sometimes religion gets in the way of the things that matter most to God.

The Pharisees - translated "religious people" - were busy at the wrong altar. Their altar was a solitary place - for God and themselves alone. The true altar, Jesus was saying, is a crowded place, with lots of people around. And what transpires between God and the individual there has everything in the world to do with what subsequently happens between individuals. Thus, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

He was quoting from a source they all knew well: the Book of the Prophet Hosea. The goal of Old Testament Religion is righteousness and justice. Righteousness has to do with the individual's standing with God: Justice - with the way love is acted out in human relationships. The most dangerous deterrent to both righteousness and justice in the Old Testament is idolatry.

Idolatry is the fundamental issue. The Ten Commandments begin with the injunction, "You shall have no other Gods before me." But the subtle twist to the issue in Old Testament terms is that idolatry is associated with slavery. When the people are in Egypt they are in bondage. When they trust God, He leads them through the wilderness into freedom. That's important. Throughout the Old Testament the issue recurs as the people chase after other gods, ending up in one form of bondage or another. Sometimes, their bondage is to their own religion. Sometimes they forget the intent of the law which was to build a community of love and justice, in their busy effort to obey it and carry out all its rituals and ceremonies.

The Hosea story was written out of that situation. Hosea's wife, Gomer, had been faithless. The law prescribed that she be stoned. But Hosea could not

give her up. His love was stronger than the religious law, and the very poignant tale of how he loved her back to faithfulness is a brilliant indictment of the idolatry of religion itself. The issue is mercy, not ritual: steadfast love and compassion, not obeying the rules. The question the prophet put to the people is simply: "Where do you stand? At what altar do you really worship?"

The texts come alive for us as we raise the same issue. At what altars do you kneel? What, really, is important to you?

Observers of our culture are quick to identify the cult of "success" as the most vigorous American religion. Its symbols are conspicuous consumption, materialism, the order of the bigger and the better, the not-so-subtle gospel of Madison Avenue that calls us to consume as a celebration of our salvation. Howard Lowry observed one time: "Even the occasional viewer of television gets the impression that America's chief business is glutting and guzzling and then recovering in some high bicarbonate fashion by taking something that acts twice as fast as something else." (Ibid, p.116). The slick magazine ads invite us to kneel at the altar of prestige: to announce our salvation to anyone who might be interested by the cut of our clothes, the model of automobile we drive and the brand of scotch we drink.

You have heard all that before and I would guess that there is no one here who does not know intuitively the emptiness of that gospel and the shoddiness of that altar. We are examining very carefully our commitment to materialism. But, there is a more subtle form of idolatry which has emerged, however; the idolatry of self. It is, by the way, the oldest and classic form of idolatry, born anew in our generation in the respectable guise of psychology. Self discovery, self awareness, self actualization have become obsessions with us, bordering at times on the edge of self deification and self worship. The New Narcissism, Tom Wolfe called it in an excellent essay: it is the theology that salvation will happen when I have finally learned who I am: been taught to love myself: and have given myself permission to do whatever I want to do without much regard for the consequences. But Professor Joseph Sittler warns: "The core of man's freedom is his self-imprisonment. He is a slave because he permits himself to be enslaved to his self's tyrannical power." (The Care of the Earth, p.146). Sittler goes on, in almost poetic language, to put his finger on the essence of the matter: talking about Luther's doctrine of sin as the "curving in of the self" he writes, "What's new is that an incurvature which has traditionally been regarded in Christian pedagogy as a disposition to be overcome is among many in our day jubilantly cultivated as a way of redemption!" (The Ecology of Faith, p.12).

The new idolatry of the late 1970's has moved beyond the materialism indicted by the Graduate. What we are dealing with now, Sittler is saying, is the elevation of the self to the position and prerogative of God...

The litanies of the new idolatry are devastating...

> Morally..."if it feels good, do it." That is to say: "me, my senses are the ethical standard."
> Politically..."what's in it for me?" That is,"my self interest is the rule."
> Intellectually..."if it doesn't turn me on now, it's irrelevant." Sittler includes a vignette in one of his books to illustrate the new intellectual egotism. One time

> holding forth on some obscure theological motif from the Council of Chalcedon, he was abruptly interrupted by a student who complained: "But, Doc, I can't interiorize this stuff!"
> Spiritually..."I want a salvation I can feel, an individual sense of God's personal love for me." That is: "in religion too, the self must be gratified."

Please understand that we need to value and esteem ourselves. We needed the impetus of the Human Potential Movement to teach us that each individual is worth something and has potential. We need to recover a sense of dignity and importance for the individual. But that whole house of cards comes crashing down when we fail to place the individual in the community of other individuals - his or her family, school, nation, human race even: or, in Christian terminology, to place it all in the context of a God who sees the highest humanity in terms of people treating one another as brothers and sisters.

Toward a recovery, then: toward kneeling at the right altar. The problem is that our culture is increasingly secular. Someone observed recently that some people believe in God: others do not. Most don't think it matters. Higher education proceeds merrily handing out sheepskins without once raising the issue of fundamental meanings and values and convictions. Secular culture approves the deification of the individual because, in secularism, it's all we have. Former President of Harvard, Nathan Pusey, marched to a different drummer and wrote, "Indeed it would seem to me to be a very superficial intellectual credo which would imply that the question of religion can be ignored. (Best Sermons, 1958-60, p.255). Pusey thought the real questions in life are always religious questions: matters of life and death and hope and meaning which the culture seems to want to ignore. He wrote, "It is no part of a college's obligation to give or impose answers, but a college should help her sons to ask the right questions - and all the questions." (Ibid, p.254). Finally, in what is one of my favorite quotes he said, "It would seem to me that the finest fruit of serious learning should be the ability to speak the word God without reserve or embarrassment, certainly without adolescent resentment: rather with some sense of communion, with reverence and with joy." (Cited by Lowry, op.cit. p.175).

Now, religion too can be idolatry. The forms and structures can get in the way of honest faith. The answer is not simply joining up, making a pledge and attending worship on occasion. That can be a shoddy altar and no one is quicker to know that than a young person. And yet, particularly to those of you who now must come to some conclusion about institutional religion apart from parental pressure, let me suggest that church and synagogue are the only places where the issue is raised, where the question is asked and where people struggle together to arrive at the answer. Religious institutions, for all their foibles and frailties, are the places where the word God is used without embarrassment, where people honestly strive to be loving and merciful and forgiving; where something other than success, prestige and self occupies the gathered attention of all.

The people who were horrified when Jesus sat at table with tax collectors and sinners meant well. They intended only to preserve and protect the institution of their religion and the faith of their fathers. But somewhere in the process they had made a god of that religion, and missed entirely its fundamental thrust and purpose. They had to be reminded that real religion, real faith in God, begins by obeying Him - and that, inevitably means welcoming other people to table.

So, modern men and women mean well by the frantic pursuit of success and prestige. No father sets out to alienate his children by working eighteen hours a day. No wife intends to devastate her marriage in the process of self-discovery. No student intends to leave integrity behind by borrowing a term paper from a roommate. No person intends to leave unattended the fundamental matters of life; But it happens all the time. It happens because what we really want in life - all of us - is a little peace, a little security, a little joy, some sense that it all matters, and we have believed that the idols of our culture will provide that. We have been kneeling at the wrong altar.

The witness of the Faith is that God wants all that for us as well: real peace, true joy, profound meaning and exhilarating freedom: freedom to become everything we can become, freedom to live deeply and fully. The Bible suggests simply that those gifts are given at the crowded altar of God himself.

I have depended on the thought of the late Howard Lowry throughout this sermon. In the last Baccalaureate address he delivered before he died he told the graduating seniors at Wooster: "If I could wish anything for a young man or woman this morning it would be the wish that, early in his days and far ahead of some desperate need, he could come to feel that his own life had eternal meaning. Tolstoy used to complain that we had lost the power to turn our minds to bear on those important things that only the near thought of death could bring. This seems a pity if it be so. It means missing so much now - this side of the hospital corridor. So much of ardor, so much of joy, so much of beholding." (Op,cit. p. 127).

The witness of the Christian faith is that when we kneel at the altar of the one God, we will see some other people kneeling there with us, and some others standing near by watching, and some others who aren't much interested in the whole project. If, as we kneel there, we learn to love them, to turn to them, parents, brothers, sisters, neighbors, strangers, with compassion and kindness and justice and healing, we will have discovered what Jesus meant when He said, "Go and learn what this means; 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'" And more; we will find that at that altar, we have been given what we have spent our lives seeking.

Amen.

God our Father, we are restless until we find our rest in You. Forgive us our willingness to worship at other altars. And love as we return; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.